

The distance- t chromatic index of graphs

Tomáš Kaiser *

Department of Mathematics and
Institute for Theoretical Computer Science
University of West Bohemia, Univerzitní 8, 306 14
Plzeň, Czech Republic
`kaisert@kma.zcu.cz`

Ross J. Kang †

Centrum Wiskunde & Informatica
PO Box 94079, 1090 GB
Amsterdam, The Netherlands
`ross.kang@gmail.com`

March 4, 2013

Abstract

We consider two graph colouring problems in which edges at distance at most t are given distinct colours, for some fixed positive integer t . We obtain two upper bounds for the distance- t chromatic index, the least number of colours necessary for such a colouring. One is a bound of $(2 - \varepsilon)\Delta^t$ for graphs of maximum degree at most Δ , where ε is some absolute positive constant independent of t . The other is a bound of $O(\Delta^t / \log \Delta)$ (as $\Delta \rightarrow \infty$) for graphs of maximum degree at most Δ and girth at least $2t + 1$. The first bound is an analogue of Molloy and Reed's bound on the strong chromatic index. The second bound is tight up to a constant multiplicative factor, as certified by a class of graphs of girth at least g , for every fixed $g \geq 3$, of arbitrarily large maximum degree Δ , with distance- t chromatic index at least $\Omega(\Delta^t / \log \Delta)$.

Keywords: graph colouring, distance edge-colouring, strong chromatic index, graph powers.

*Supported by project P202/12/G061 of the Czech Science Foundation.

†Supported by a NWO Veni Grant. Part of this work was carried out while this author was at Durham University, supported by EPSRC, grant EP/G066604/1.

1 Introduction

Given a graph $G = (V, E)$ and a positive integer t , a *distance- t edge-colouring* of G is a colouring of the edges such that no two edges within distance t are given the same colour. Here, the distance between two edges is defined as the number of *vertices* in a shortest path between them. Adjacent edges have distance 1 and thus a distance-1 edge-colouring is just a proper edge-colouring. The *distance- t chromatic index* of G , denoted $\chi'_t(G)$, is the least integer k such that there exists a distance- t edge-colouring of G using k colours. Distance-2 edge-colourings, also known as *strong edge-colourings*, have a rich history, going back to problems posed in 1985 (cf. [4]).

The distance- t edge-colouring problem is related to colouring powers of graphs. Observe that $\chi'_t(G) = \chi((L(G))^t)$, where $\chi(\cdot)$ denotes the chromatic number, $L(\cdot)$ denotes the line graph, and the t -th power of a graph is the graph obtained by adding the edges between pairs of vertices at distance at most t . The distance between two vertices is defined as the number of *edges* in a shortest path between them. To be unambiguous, we remark here that, for us, the distance between a vertex and an edge is the smaller of the distances between the vertex and each endvertex of the edge.

In this paper, we study the distance- t chromatic index of graphs of bounded maximum degree. In this setting, observe first that, if G has maximum degree at most Δ , then easily

$$\chi'_t(G) \leq 1 + 2 \sum_{j=1}^t (\Delta - 1)^j < 2\Delta^t,$$

since the maximum degree of $(L(G))^t$ is at most $2 \sum_{j=1}^t (\Delta - 1)^j$. It is natural to wonder whether this trivial upper bound can be improved upon. Erdős and Nešetřil did so in 1985 (cf. [4]) for the $t = 2$ case, and in particular asked if there is some constant $\varepsilon > 0$ such that for all graphs G of maximum degree at most Δ it holds that $\chi'_2(G) \leq (2 - \varepsilon)\Delta^2$. They pointed out a simple class of graphs (blown-up 5-cycles) of arbitrarily large maximum degree Δ with strong chromatic index $5\Delta^2/4$. For $t \geq 3$, the second author together with Putra Manggala [6] recently observed that there are examples of regular graphs of arbitrarily large degree Δ with distance- t chromatic index greater than $\Delta^t / (2(t - 1)^{t-1}) = \Omega(\Delta^t)$, which thus certifies that the trivial upper bound cannot be replaced by any bound that is $o(\Delta^t)$. In the specific case $t = 3$, they also gave an alternative construction based on projective geometries that yields bipartite regular graphs of girth 6 with arbitrarily large degree Δ and distance-3 chromatic index $\Delta^3 - \Delta^2 + \Delta$.

More than a decade after it was posed, Molloy and Reed [8], using a combination of structural and probabilistic methods, were able to provide a positive answer to the strong chromatic index question of Erdős and Nešetřil, for some ε greater than 0.002. Our first main result provides a distance- t ($t \geq 3$) analogue

of this bound with an absolute choice of ε valid for all t .

Theorem 1. *Let $\varepsilon = 0.00008$ and let $t \geq 2$ be a fixed integer. For large enough Δ_0 , the distance- t chromatic index $\chi'_t(G)$ of any graph G of maximum degree $\Delta \geq \Delta_0$ is at most $(2 - \varepsilon)\Delta^t$.*

We point out that our proof of Theorem 1 provides a different solution to the problem of Erdős and Nešetřil (albeit with a weaker constant), by a method that applies uniformly to all $t \geq 2$. We have found that the specific argument of Molloy and Reed can be adapted to the case $t = 3$ (with a choice of $\varepsilon > 0.0002$), but omit the full details since it remains unclear if this can be extended any further to, say, $t = 4$ or $t = 5$.

Our second main result is a $o(\Delta^t)$ upper bound for graphs of large girth. The following may be considered as an extension of an $O(\Delta^2/\log \Delta)$ bound on χ'_2 for C_4 -free graphs due to Mahdian [7].

Theorem 2. *Let $t \geq 2$ be a fixed integer. For all graphs G of girth at least $2t + 1$ and maximum degree at most Δ it holds that $\chi'_t(G) = O(\Delta^t/\log \Delta)$.*

By a probabilistic construction, this bound is tight up to a constant factor dependent upon t .

Proposition 3. *There is a function $f = f(\Delta, t) = (1 + o(1))\Delta^t/(t \log \Delta)$ (as $\Delta \rightarrow \infty$) such that, for every $g \geq 3$ and every Δ , there is a graph G of girth at least g and maximum degree at most Δ with $\chi'_t(G) \geq f(\Delta, t)$.*

The complete bipartite graphs $K_{\Delta, \Delta}$ are regular of arbitrarily large degree Δ , have girth 4 and strong chromatic index Δ^2 as noted in [4]. Similarly, the examples based on projective geometries mentioned above are regular of arbitrarily large degree Δ , have girth 6 and distance-3 chromatic index $\Omega(\Delta^3)$. Thus the girth condition in Theorem 2 cannot be weakened for the cases $t = 2$ and $t = 3$; however, for $t \geq 4$, no construction is known of graphs of arbitrarily large maximum degree Δ , with girth greater than 3 and $\Omega(\Delta^t)$ distance- t chromatic index.

We note that, if the girth condition in Theorem 2 is strengthened, then it is possible to improve the bound to one that is tight up to a constant multiple independent of t . For the chromatic number of the t -th power of a graph of maximum degree Δ and girth at least g , Alon and Mohar [2] outlined an upper bound of $O(\Delta^t/(t \log \Delta))$ if $g \geq 3t + 1$. In a similar fashion, the following can be shown to hold, and we leave the details to the reader.

Proposition 4. *Let $t \geq 2$ be a fixed integer. For all graphs G of girth at least $3t - 2$ and maximum degree at most Δ it holds that $\chi'_t(G) = O(\Delta^t/(t \log \Delta))$.*

Our upper bounds (Theorems 1 and 2 and Proposition 4) follow by first performing a structural neighbourhood count, then applying a known chromatic number upper bound given each of the neighbourhood subgraphs has bounded

sparsity. We briefly review chromatic number bounds for graphs with sparse neighbourhoods in Section 2; these tools all depend on the Lovász Local Lemma.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Section 2, we review known results on the colouring of graphs with sparse neighbourhoods. In Section 3, we develop the general upper bound. In Section 4, we prove the upper bound for graphs of high girth and also give the probabilistic construction showing said bound is tight up to a constant multiple. Some open problems are mentioned in the conclusion.

Notation and preliminaries

Graphs in this paper have no parallel edges or loops. Let $G = (V, E)$ be a graph. We use the following notation.

- For $u, v \in V$, a uv -walk is a sequence $(u, e_1, v_1, \dots, e_\ell, v)$ such that each element in the sequence is incident (in G) with the following element in the sequence. The *length* of such a walk is ℓ . We may also refer to the above as an $e_1 e_\ell$ -walk and instead write $(e_1, v_1, \dots, v_{\ell-1}, e_\ell)$ if no confusion between the vertices and edges can arise.
- For $A, B \subseteq V$, the symbol $[A, B]_G$ denotes the set of all edges of E that have one endvertex in A and one in B .
- For $A \subseteq V$, $G[A]$ denotes the subgraph of G induced by the vertices of A .
- For $X \subseteq E$, $G[X]$ denotes the graph (V, X) .
- For $v \in V$, the *neighbourhood* $N_G(v)$ of v is the set of all vertices that are adjacent to v , and the degree $\deg_G(v)$ of v is the cardinality of $N_G(v)$. We may omit the subscript G when the context is clear.
- For $v \in V$, the set of edges of G incident with v is denoted by $G(v)$.

2 Colouring graphs with sparse neighbourhoods

It is easy to see that a graph's chromatic number is at most its maximum degree plus one. Beginning with the unpublished work of Johansson [5] in the mid-1990's, there were several results improving upon this bound in the case of graphs for which the number of edges spanning each neighbourhood set is bounded. We state some of these bounds here. All of these were proved using the probabilistic method, with the Lovász Local Lemma.

Theorem 5 (Johansson [5]). *For all triangle-free graphs \hat{G} with maximum degree at most $\hat{\Delta}$, it holds that $\chi(\hat{G}) = O(\hat{\Delta}/\log \hat{\Delta})$.*

Theorem 6 (Molloy and Reed [8]). *Let $\delta, \varepsilon > 0$ be such that $\varepsilon < \frac{\delta}{2(1-\varepsilon)}e^{-\frac{3}{1-\varepsilon}}$. There is some large enough $\hat{\Delta}_0$ such that the following holds. If $\hat{G} = (\hat{V}, \hat{E})$ is a graph with maximum degree at most $\hat{\Delta} \geq \hat{\Delta}_0$ such that for each $\hat{v} \in \hat{V}$ there are at most $(1-\delta)\binom{\hat{\Delta}}{2}$ edges spanning $N(\hat{v})$, then $\chi(\hat{G}) \leq (1-\varepsilon)\hat{\Delta}$.*

Theorem 7 (Alon, Krivelevich and Sudakov [1]). *For all graphs $\hat{G} = (\hat{V}, \hat{E})$ with maximum degree at most $\hat{\Delta}$ such that for each $\hat{v} \in \hat{V}$ there are at most $\hat{\Delta}^2/f$ edges spanning $N(\hat{v})$, it holds that $\chi(\hat{G}) = O(\hat{\Delta}/\log f)$.*

Theorem 8 (Mahdian [7]). *Let $\varepsilon > 0$. There is some large enough $\hat{\Delta}_0$ such that the following holds. If $\hat{G} = (\hat{V}, \hat{E})$ is a graph with maximum degree at most $\hat{\Delta} \geq \hat{\Delta}_0$ such that for each $\hat{v} \in \hat{V}$,*

- (i) *the largest independent set in the subgraph spanning $N(\hat{v})$ has at most $O(\hat{\Delta}^{1/2})$ vertices, and*
- (ii) *with the exception of at most $O(\hat{\Delta}^{1/2})$ neighbours of \hat{v} , every vertex $\hat{u} \in \hat{V}$ has at most $O(\hat{\Delta}^{1/2})$ common neighbours with \hat{v} ,*

then $\chi(\hat{G}) \leq (1+\varepsilon)\hat{\Delta}/\log \hat{\Delta}$.

3 A general upper bound

In this section, we prove Theorem 1. We use Theorem 6 in combination with the following structural lemma.

Lemma 9. *Let $t \geq 2$ be a fixed integer. For $\delta = 1/618 \approx 0.001618$ and large enough Δ_0 , it holds that, if $\hat{G} = (\hat{V}, \hat{E})$ is $L(G)^t$ for some graph $G = (V, E)$ of maximum degree at most $\Delta \geq \Delta_0$, then there are at most $(2-2\delta) \cdot \Delta^{2t}$ edges spanning the neighbourhood of each vertex of \hat{V} .*

Proof. Without loss of generality, we assume that $G = (V, E)$ is Δ -regular. Let $\hat{G} = (\hat{V}, \hat{E})$ be $L(G)^t$ and pick an arbitrary $e^* \in \hat{V}$. Note that e^* is an edge of G .

Set

$$\hat{N} = N_{\hat{G}}(e^*) \quad \text{and} \quad \hat{S} = E(\hat{G}[\hat{N}]).$$

For a contradiction, let us assume that

$$|\hat{S}| > (2-2\delta)\Delta^{2t}. \tag{1}$$

For $X, Y \subseteq E$, let $W_\ell(X, Y)$ denote the collection of walks in G of length at most ℓ starting with an edge in X and ending with an edge in Y , and let $w_\ell(X, Y) = |W_\ell(X, Y)|$. If X or Y contains only a single edge, then we omit the set brackets and write, for example, $w_\ell(e, f)$. For $e, f \in E$, let

$$\tau(e, f) = \max\{w_{t+1}(e, f) - 1, 0\}.$$

Observe that, for $e, f \in \hat{V}$, we have $w_{t+1}(e, f) > 0$ if and only if $ef \in \hat{E}$ or $e = f$. Thus

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{e, f \in \hat{N}} \tau(e, f) &= \sum_{e, f \in \hat{N}} w_{t+1}(e, f) - (2|\hat{S}| + |\hat{N}|) \\ &< w_{t+1}(\hat{N}, \hat{N}) - 2|\hat{S}|. \end{aligned} \quad (2)$$

Combining (2) with the observation that $w_{t+1}(\hat{N}, E) < 4\Delta^{2t}$, we obtain

$$\begin{aligned} 4\Delta^{2t} &> w_{t+1}(\hat{N}, E) = w_{t+1}(\hat{N}, \hat{N}) + w_{t+1}(\hat{N}, E - \hat{N}) \\ &= \sum_{e, f \in \hat{N}} \tau(e, f) + 2|\hat{S}| + w_{t+1}(\hat{N}, E - \hat{N}). \end{aligned}$$

Thus with (1) we have

$$\sum_{e, f \in \hat{N}} \tau(e, f) + w_{t+1}(\hat{N}, E - \hat{N}) < 4\delta \cdot \Delta^{2t}. \quad (3)$$

For $i \in \{0, \dots, t\}$, let A_i be the set of vertices of G at distance i from e^* . In particular, A_0 consists of the two endvertices of e^* . Set $A = A_0 \cup \dots \cup A_{t-1}$. Furthermore, let B_t be the set of vertices $u \in A_t$ such that

$$\deg_{G[\hat{N}]}(u) \geq \Delta/2. \quad (4)$$

Trivially, (4) also holds for any $u \in A$.

For $u, v \in V$, let us write $\sigma_t(u, v)$ for the number of uv -walks of length at most ℓ whose first edge is in \hat{N} . Setting $\alpha = 1 - 5\delta$, $\beta = \alpha/36$ and $\gamma = \beta/(2\beta + 1)$, the desired contradiction will be obtained with use of the following two claims.

Claim 10.

$$\sum_{\substack{u, v \in A \cup B_t \\ \sigma_t(u, v) \geq \beta\Delta}} \sigma_t(u, v) > \alpha \cdot \Delta^{2t-1}.$$

Claim 11. *If $u, v \in A \cup B_t$ are such that $\sigma_t(u, v) \geq \beta\Delta$, then*

$$\sum_{\substack{e \in G[\hat{N}](u) \\ f \in G[\hat{N}](v)}} \tau(e, f) \geq \gamma\Delta \cdot \sigma_t(u, v).$$

Before proving these claims, let us see how they imply the lemma. We sum the inequality in Claim 11 over all $u, v \in A \cup B_t$ such that $\sigma_t(u, v) \geq \beta\Delta$. Correcting the possible overcounting by a factor of 4, we obtain

$$\sum_{e, f \in \hat{N}} \tau(e, f) \geq \frac{\gamma\Delta}{4} \cdot \sum_{\substack{u, v \in A \cup B_t \\ \sigma_t(u, v) \geq \beta\Delta}} \sigma_t(u, v) > \frac{\gamma\Delta}{4} \alpha \cdot \Delta^{2t-1} = \frac{\gamma\alpha}{4} \cdot \Delta^{2t},$$

where the last inequality follows from Claim 10. This contradicts (3) if $\gamma\alpha/4 > 4\delta$. Substituting the values of α , β and γ , we find, after some routine manipulation, that $\gamma\alpha/4 > 4\delta$ is equivalent to $185\delta^2 - 618\delta + 1 > 0$, which is true if $0 < \delta \leq 1/618$. As e^* is an arbitrary element of \hat{V} , the resultant contradiction proves the lemma.

Proof of Claim 10. This proof amounts to verifying the following inequality:

$$\sum_{u,v \in A \cup B_t} \sigma_t(u, v) > 2\alpha \cdot \Delta^{2t-1}. \quad (5)$$

The reason for this is as follows. Assuming the truth of (5), the mean of $\sigma_t(u, v)$ over all $u, v \in A \cup B_t$ is at least $2\alpha \cdot \Delta^{2t-1}/|A \cup B_t|^2$. Claim 10 is now implied by the following elementary inequality: if x_1, \dots, x_n are quantities with mean at least a , then

$$\sum_{i: x_i \geq a/2} x_i > \frac{an}{2}.$$

Before continuing, let us make a basic observation about the cardinality of A :

$$(2 - 2\delta)\Delta^{t-1} < |A|. \quad (6)$$

If this does not hold, then $|\hat{N}| \leq \Delta|A| \leq (2 - 2\delta)\Delta^t$ which in turn implies that $|\hat{S}| \leq \binom{|\hat{N}|}{2} < (2 - 2\delta)\Delta^{2t}$, a contradiction to (1).

To prove (5), we start by counting all walks in G of length at most t whose first vertex, say u , is in A . By (6), there are at least $(2 - 2\delta)\Delta^{t-1}$ choices for u , and so the number of such walks is at least $(2 - 2\delta)\Delta^{2t-1}$. Of these walks, those whose last vertex is outside of $A \cup B_t$ we call *bad*. To any bad walk W with last vertex v , we may append any of the at least $\Delta/2$ edges incident with v and not contained in \hat{N} (since $v \notin A \cup B_t$) to obtain a walk in $W_{t+1}(\hat{N}, E - \hat{N})$. Since the obtained walks are distinct for distinct choices of u , W and the appended edge, we deduce from (3) that the number of bad walks is less than

$$\frac{4\delta \cdot \Delta^{2t}}{\Delta/2} = 8\delta \cdot \Delta^{2t-1}.$$

We then conclude that more than $(2 - 2\delta - 8\delta)\Delta^{2t-1} = 2\alpha \cdot \Delta^{2t-1}$ walks of length at most t with first vertex in A are not bad. This completes the proof of (5) and hence of the claim. \diamond

Proof of Claim 11. For $u, v \in V$ and $f \in G[\hat{N}](v)$, we let $\sigma_\ell(u; f, v)$ denote the number of uv -walks of length at most ℓ whose first edge is in \hat{N} and whose last edge is f . Call f *relevant* if $\sigma_t(u; f, v) > 0$. For this proof, we consider two cases.

Case 1. *At least $\gamma\Delta$ edges of $G[\hat{N}](v)$ are relevant.*

Let $e \in G[\hat{N}](u)$ and $f \in G[\hat{N}](v)$ with f relevant. Observe that, if W is a vu -walk of length at most t whose last edge is e , then we may prepend f to obtain a walk in $W_{t+1}(f, e)$. A similar observation holds for uv -walks of length at most t . We find that

$$w_{t+1}(e, f) \geq \sigma_t(v; e, u) + \sigma_t(u; f, v).$$

Since f is relevant, we infer that $\tau(e, f) \geq \sigma_t(v; e, u)$ and thus

$$\sum_{\substack{e \in G[\hat{N}](u) \\ f \in G[\hat{N}](v)}} \tau(e, f) \geq \gamma\Delta \cdot \sum_{e \in G[\hat{N}](u)} \sigma(v; e, u) = \gamma\Delta \cdot \sigma_t(u, v).$$

Case 2. *Fewer than $\gamma\Delta$ edges of $G[\hat{N}](v)$ are relevant.*

As in the last case, if $e \in G[\hat{N}](u)$ and $f \in G[\hat{N}](v)$, then $w_{t+1}(e, f) \geq \sigma_t(u; f, v)$. Using inequality (4) (valid for u since $u \in A \cup B_t$) and the assumption of Case 2, we obtain

$$\begin{aligned} \sum_{\substack{e \in G[\hat{N}](u) \\ f \in G[\hat{N}](v)}} \tau(e, f) &\geq \sum_{e \in G[\hat{N}](u)} \sum_{\substack{f \in G[\hat{N}](v) \\ f \text{ relevant}}} (w_{t+1}(e, f) - 1) \\ &\geq \frac{\Delta}{2} \cdot \sum_{\substack{f \in G[\hat{N}](v) \\ f \text{ relevant}}} (\sigma_t(u; f, v) - 1) \\ &\geq \frac{\Delta}{2} \cdot \sigma_t(u, v) - \frac{\Delta}{2} \cdot \gamma\Delta. \end{aligned}$$

What remains is a routine verification that the resulting expression is at least $\gamma\Delta \cdot \sigma_t(u, v)$, which follows from the assumption that $\sigma_t(u, v) \geq \beta\Delta$.

This concludes the proof of Claim 11. \diamond

Having proved Claims 10 and 11, the proof of Lemma 9 is now complete. \square

We proceed to prove Theorem 1. Suppose that $t \geq 2$ is fixed, Δ is large enough and \hat{v} is a vertex of $\hat{G} = L(G)^t$. By Lemma 9, there are at most $(2 - 2\delta) \cdot \Delta^{2t}$ edges spanning $N(\hat{v})$, where $\delta = 1/618$. To apply Theorem 6, we need to replace the Δ^{2t} term by $\binom{\hat{\Delta}}{2}$, where $\hat{\Delta} = 2\Delta^t$ is an upper bound on the maximum degree of \hat{G} . Since $(2 - 2\delta) \cdot \Delta^{2t}$ approaches $(1 - \delta)\binom{\hat{\Delta}}{2}$ (and Δ is large enough), the number of edges spanning $N(\hat{v})$ is at most

$$(1 - \delta') \cdot \binom{\hat{\Delta}}{2},$$

where δ' is a little smaller than δ , say $\delta' = 1/619$. Setting $\varepsilon' = 1/25000$, it is routine to check that

$$\varepsilon' < \frac{\delta'}{2(1 - \varepsilon')} \cdot e^{-3/(1 - \varepsilon')},$$

making Theorem 6 applicable to \hat{G} with δ' and ε' . We conclude that

$$\chi(\hat{G}) \leq (1 - \varepsilon')\hat{\Delta} = (2 - 2\varepsilon') \cdot \Delta^t,$$

which completes the proof of Theorem 1.

4 Graphs of prescribed girth

In this section, we prove Theorem 2 and Proposition 3.

For Theorem 2, we require the following lemma.

Lemma 12. *Let $t \geq 2$ be a fixed integer. Suppose $\hat{G} = (\hat{V}, \hat{E})$ is $L(G)^t$ for some graph $G = (V, E)$ of girth at least $2t + 1$ with maximum degree at most Δ . So \hat{G} has maximum degree at most $\hat{\Delta} = 2\Delta^t$. Then, for each $\hat{v} \in \hat{V}$, with the exception of at most $2\Delta^{t-1} = O(\hat{\Delta}^{1-1/t})$ neighbours of \hat{v} , every vertex $\hat{u} \in \hat{V}$ has at most $(3t + 2)\Delta^{t-1} = O(\hat{\Delta}^{1-1/t})$ common neighbours with \hat{v} .*

Proof. Let e^* be an arbitrary edge of G . As in the proof of Lemma 9, for $i \in \{0, \dots, t\}$, we let A_i be the set of vertices of G at distance i from e^* .

We say that an edge in G is *heavy* if its distance from e^* is less than t ; otherwise, we say it is *light*. Using the girth condition, it is straightforward to verify the following three claims.

Claim 13. *Every vertex in A_{t-1} is incident with at most one heavy edge.*

Claim 14. *At most one endvertex of a light edge is in A_{t-1} .*

Claim 15. *Every vertex in A_t is adjacent to at most two vertices in A_{t-1} .*

Now consider any $f \in N_{\hat{G}}(e^*)$ that is not a heavy edge, i.e. f is a light edge in $N_{\hat{G}}(e^*)$. We want to estimate the number of members of $N_{\hat{G}}(e^*)$ at distance at most t from f in G . Trivially, there are at most $2\Delta^{t-1}$ heavy edges at distance at most t from f in G . To enumerate the $f e_t$ -walks $(f, v_1, e_1, \dots, v_t, e_t)$ of length $t + 1$ where e_t is a light edge in $N_{\hat{G}}(e^*)$, we condition on the least $i \in \{1, \dots, t\}$ such that one of the following events occurs: (i) $v_i \in A_{t-1}$ and e_i is a heavy edge, or (ii) $v_i \in A_t$ and e_i is a light edge in $N_{\hat{G}}(e^*)$. By Claim 14, the set of light edges in $N_{\hat{G}}(e^*)$ is precisely the set $[A_{t-1}, A_t]_G$, and the induced subgraph $G[A_{t-1}]$ has no edges. Considering the fact that e_t is a light edge in $N_{\hat{G}}(e^*)$, we conclude that the quantity i in the conditioning above is well-defined.

By Claims 13 and 15, there are at most three choices for the edge e_i , while there are up to Δ choices for each of the remaining edges in the path. Therefore,

the total number of such paths is upper bounded by $3t \cdot \Delta^{t-1}$. Summing up, there are at most $(3t + 2)\Delta^{t-1} = O(\Delta^{t-1})$ edges at distance at most t from f in G . There are at most $2\Delta^{t-1} = O(\Delta^{t-1})$ heavy edges. Since e^* was an arbitrary element of \hat{V} , this completes the proof. \square

The conclusion of Lemma 12 implies that for each $\hat{v} \in \hat{V}$ there are at most $\hat{\Delta}/f$ edges spanning $N(\hat{v})$, for $f = 4\Delta/(3t + 4) = O(\hat{\Delta}^{1/t})$. An application of Theorem 7 to \hat{G} then yields Theorem 2.

It is worth noting that, under the conditions of Lemma 12, the largest independent set in the subgraph spanning $N(v)$ has size $O(\hat{\Delta}^{1-1/t})$ for each $v \in \hat{V}$. Therefore, if some analogue of Theorem 8 holds in which the $O(\hat{\Delta}^{1/2})$ conditions are replaced by $O(\hat{\Delta}^{1-1/t})$ conditions, then we would obtain a stronger upper bound on $\chi'_t(G)$ for graphs G of girth $2t + 1$.

Next, to show that the bound in Theorem 2 is tight up to a constant multiple, we use a probabilistic construction inspired by the classical proof due to Erdős [3] that there are graphs with arbitrarily large girth and chromatic number. Similar constructions for strong edge-colouring and colouring powers of graphs are found in [2] and [7], respectively. Let $G_{n,p}$ be a random graph on n vertices with edge probability p . We say that a property holds asymptotically almost surely (a.a.s.) if it holds with probability tending to 1 as $n \rightarrow \infty$. The *distance- t matching number* $\mu_t(G)$ of a graph G is defined as the size of a largest set of edges in G such that no two of its members are at distance at most t . Clearly, $\chi'_t(G) \geq |E|/\mu_t(G)$ for any graph $G = (V, E)$. For the proof of Proposition 3, we require the following estimate of $\mu_t(G_{n,p})$.

Lemma 16 (Kang and Manggala [6]). *Let $\varepsilon > 0$ and suppose $p = d/n$ with $d \geq d_0$ for some large fixed d_0 . If*

$$k_t = \frac{n}{2d^{t-1}} (t \log d - \log \log d - \log et + \varepsilon),$$

then $\mu_t(G_{n,p}) \leq k_t$ a.a.s.

Proof of Proposition 3. Let $G = G_{n,p}$ where $p = d/n$ for $d = (\log n)^{1/(g+1)}$. By Lemma 16, $\mu_t(G) < nt \log d / (2d^{t-1})$ a.a.s. The following are routine random graph estimates: a.a.s.,

- (i) the expected number of cycles of length less than g in G is less than $\log n$;
- (ii) the number of edges incident with vertices with degree at least $d + d/\log d$ is at most n ; and
- (iii) the number of edges in G is $(1 + o(1))nd/2$.

Now remove from G all edges in cycles of length less than g and all vertices having degree at least $d + d/\log d$. By the above estimates, the remaining graph a.a.s. has

at least $(1+o(1))n\Delta/2$ edges, girth at least g , and $\mu_t < (1+o(1))nt \log \Delta / (2\Delta^{t-1})$. Thus, a.a.s. it is a graph of girth at least g with distance- t chromatic index at least

$$(1+o(1))\frac{n\Delta/2}{nt \log \Delta / (2\Delta^{t-1})} = (1+o(1))\frac{\Delta^t}{t \log \Delta}. \quad \square$$

5 Concluding remarks

It would be interesting to find classes with larger distance- t chromatic index with respect to the maximum degree. Unlike for the case $t = 2$ — Erdős and Nešetřil conjectured that the blown-up 5-cycle is optimal — no extremal classes have been conjectured yet for $t \geq 3$; however, our knowledge is rather limited. In fact, we know of no classes with $\Omega(\Delta^t)$ distance- t chromatic index aside from the two mentioned in the introduction.

We do suspect that the examples from projective geometries are extremal for the distance-3 chromatic index with respect to maximum degree Δ . However, then the upper bound of $1.9998\Delta^3$ (extending Molloy and Reed’s bound) would be nearly double the true value.

Further improvements in the constant ε for the upper bound of Theorem 1 are possible. In particular, Molloy and Reed [8] alluded to an improvement for Theorem 6, which if implemented imply immediate improvements in ε for Theorem 1 as well as for their own bound on the strong chromatic index. However, the resulting bounds could remain far from best possible. Indeed, there is no class of examples to preclude an upper bound that replaces the factor $(2 - \varepsilon)$ in Theorem 1 by some factor that decreases to zero as $t \rightarrow \infty$.

The cases $t = 2$ and $t = 3$ of Theorem 2 hint at the existence for each $t \geq 4$ of some threshold parameter g_t such that

- there are graphs of arbitrarily large maximum degree Δ with girth g_t and distance- t chromatic index at least $\Omega(\Delta^t)$, and
- any graph of maximum degree at most Δ with girth at least $g_t + 1$ has distance- t chromatic index at most $O(\Delta^t / \log \Delta)$.

For $t \geq 4$, it may indeed hold that $g_t = 2t$, but the graphs in the general class of $\Omega(\Delta^t)$ examples mentioned in the introduction each have many short cycles. The question of whether g_t exists is similar to a question for colouring powers of graphs of prescribed girth, which was posed a decade ago [2] and remains open. It is worth remarking here that an $O(\Delta^t / \log \Delta)$ bound for colouring the t -th power of graphs of maximum degree Δ and girth at least $2t + 3$ follows by adapting the method used in Theorem 2. This suggests that a “drastic change” in the chromatic number of the power of a graph with maximum degree Δ and girth at least g occurs at some $g \leq 2t + 3$, rather than around $g = 3t + 1$. This partially answers a question posed at the end of the paper by Alon and Mohar.

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